

Historic buildings in contemporary town-planning complexes

Jiří Vajčner

Jiří Vajčner - studied at the Industry Secondary School in Strážnice (1987-1991), the Business School in Prague (1992-1994), the Charles University (1995-2000) and the Czech Technical University in Prague (2004-2007). Since 1994, he has been working in the Ministry of Culture, now at the position of Director of the National Heritage Department. He is a lecturer at the Charles University in Prague and at the Institute for Public Administration in Prague.

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A phenomenon such as the role of historic buildings in built-up areas, which is so difficult to grasp, cannot be discussed in all of its details and nuances within such a limited time frame. However, let me mention two major segments of this topic: firstly, the proportions of the relationship between architecture, environment, and heritage of thought; secondly, the basic principles of the coexistence of historic and contemporary buildings.

Environment in today's interpretation mostly means the environment shaped by animate and inanimate nature. However, it must also be understood as the environment of town-building complexes with all of its integral parts. Among them, items that we can call historic sights, cultural goods, cultural heritage or cultural monuments have a unique and irreplaceable role to play. They are exactly what substantially determines the dimensions of our living environment. Today, it is a generally recognised fact that cultural monuments are an integral part of a nation's cultural heritage, a witness of its history, an important environmental factor, and an irreplaceable national wealth when conditions for their preservation and proper use are (or should be) created in order to let them participate in the development of culture, arts, science and education, and in the general development of a nation's cultural potential.

Since the early periods of landscape settlement by humans, in particular due to the increasing ability of humans to substantially reshape the landscape, a certain tension has been noticeable between respecting the original structure of the place and the extensive gradual urbanisation of the world. Today, the need for the protection of "genius loci" is escalating much more noticeably. Increasingly, high-quality, balanced, built-up areas give way to larger or smaller modern buildings, which we cannot

always perceive as something positive. As a result, and also due to other negative influences, there are global changes in the still relatively balanced forces that are applied in contemporary urban complexes.

In the approach to town-building and architecture, we can apply the following theses, which have been, for example, presented by Konrad Lorenz or Jitka Ortova: town-building expresses the ground-plan of life-style while architectonic order gives it a specific individualised expression. Urbanisation and architecture are not identical, yet they have a synergetic effect and their genesis is related to the elementary anthropological need for livability of the environment.¹ Livability of the environment is perceived by humans as more or less felt satisfaction with the impact of the living environment on humans. Perception of shapes seems to be most important, and is the basis for the human sense of harmony, the complexity of which is so immense that it often exceeds the scope of what our mind can catch.² To a certain extent, perception of shapes has the character of data: the collection of data is a process of learning and gaining experience. Sensory data, which is ruled by the perceived laws, must be presented repeatedly so that our perception apparatus is able to catch the relevant rule. It is necessary to mention that such perception is intensified by co-existence symbiosis of urbanised architecture and the green spaces but also of architecture and the mental print, or spiritual print, if you like, if such forms are mutually accentuated or harmonically complemented. Numerous cities, towns and villages contain extremely interesting architecture and urbanism of residential buildings with adjacent public buildings, extensive areas of cultivated green, roads and small architecture, but also an indelible mental or spiritual heritage of the place. All of these three components, being architecture, urbanised landscape and heritage of thought were established and have been maintained by humans, or by human activities determining such complexes in the course of time until today. As Tomaš Jiranek has pointed out,³ if we overshadow one component of the area, the other two stand out and this correlation is driven by humans. In order to be born, architecture needs

1 Jitka Ortova, *Kulturnı a socialnı ekologie*, Part II, Prague 1997, p. 64.

2 Konrad Lorenz, *Odumırnı lidskosti*, Prague 1997.

3 Compare: Tomaš Jiranek, *Kone, lide, krajina*, text written as a speech for the conference "Impact of nature on human health", which took place in the National Museum in Prague on November 11th to 12th 1999.

a mental (spiritual) vibration and landscape; landscape is determined by architecture, town-building and human ideas; and humans create architecture, landscape and spirituality. If one leaves the relationship or becomes more distant, the relationship is forced to end because the essence of the relationship falls apart. Since it is a cultural relationship, humans are the strongest influence. If the farmer type prevails, both architecture and landscape lose, the area partly grows wild and is partly ploughed up. If the merchant type prevails, architecture and landscape lose again, but spirituality also loses because a dead cultural area is born, as is the case in many complexes that are valuable from the point of view of monument protection. If humans leave the place, nothing survives and the area goes through a dynamic environmental succession with a distant and rather unpredictable climax. At these levels, humans perceive all town-planning complexes, which have architecture properly integrated into the natural environment, with the necessary but beneficial influence of the ancient spiritual heritage of the place. Humans mainly perceive values only partially – they can appreciate brilliant architecture, unique technical work, a shining jewel or a beautiful natural structure.

One of the basic requirements for urbanisation and architecture must be the ability to express the awareness of correlation between human life and the historic or possibly natural environment.⁴ For this reason, it is not possible to allow devastating, over-proportioned or inconsistent building interventions into valuable historic buildings, and their complexes or cultural landscape. Lamentations of architects regarding a lack of opportunities for the author's creation, as expressed by Max Frisch many years ago in his diary, even today give the impression of the inability of architects to handle pre-determined input values of the building and place, as well as the lack of willingness to preserve the character of the given town-building quantities. Generally speaking, it is hardly possible to agree that an architectonic solution is joyless and unfree if a lot is not made available for a new building. It is not possible to vigorously grab a pencil and draw our ego. It is necessary to empathise with the genius loci of the place, block or neighbourhood and start respecting the context. On the other hand, the new cannot always be rejected even before an architect reaches for a pencil, because truly sensitive architectonic designs of high-quality always find their place in the sun.

4 Jitka Ortová, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

New construction can be necessary in many cases, although optimal forms must be chosen. All of this devolves to the permanent and gradual care for cultural goods just as people have cared for their property for centuries, ensuring the continuity and moderate replacement of time-worn parts, ideally in the original materials, and supplements produced with original technologies, while maintaining the original character of the item. The term “continuity of authenticity”⁵ urgently comes to mind, which contains the following theses: preservation of authenticity must be understood as the correlation, connection and connectedness of both material and immaterial elements of an item. It is not necessary to narrow-mindedly insist on the strict requirement of absolute originality of an item but on the lasting existence of an item as a whole in the course of history. Against the background of historic development, we must respect the original state and original concept, including location and placement of an item; it is necessary to fully preserve the spirit, tradition or impression. However, the material substance should be gradually replaced at the end of its lifespan, essence of ideas should follow the changes of time and function of items in this respect, and the preservation of tradition should essentially be a constant element. It is not easy to find an optimal solution for preserving the authenticity of items, in particular when it comes to historic buildings; however, consistent blending and awareness of the mutual effect of mass and idea, which together shape historic sights in their primary meaning, can allow for preservation of essential parts of our cultural heritage in such a state that will provide exact and comprehensive information on the material structure and spiritual heritage of the historic sight over the course of time.

The quality of architecture cannot be assessed with exact methods since quality or significance are not mathematical quantities. On the other hand, beauty and nobleness have been assessed for centuries and elegance, proportionality, balanced mass and other attributes of perfect buildings are clearly perceptible. It is possible to fully reject arguments that it is more important to create something new at any cost even with a lesser value. The new must deserve the place of the old, it must fight for its right to live. The destructive tendencies of humankind have never had a positive impact and this also applies to architecture. Building something

5 Compare: *Document on Authenticity*, Nara 1994, International documents of ICOMOS on the protection of cultural heritage.

new only because it is different – worse but different – seems to be more than unreasonable. We then encounter the basic question as to why to protect and care for the old, which is often represented by damaged and plaster-chipped buildings, and heterogeneous or – on the contrary – dull town-building complexes?

First of all, it is necessary to emphasise that culture is an extremely important part of humanity and that culture is as old as humanity. Undoubtedly, it is an important factor of the life of civil society which makes a basal contribution to its growth. It contributes to the development of mind, morality and emotions of each citizen without exception, and it plays an irreplaceable role in this respect. One of the most important parts of the cultural wealth of a nation is its heritage fund, the contribution of which – as already suggested – results from historic, artistic, esthetic, heritage-related and instrumental values. Last but not least, economic importance, in particular in connection with tourism, plays a role. The most important significance of heritage fund preservation is its hidden but omnipresent impact on humans, their moods, emotions and intellect.

So how can we understand the relationship between old and historic built-up areas, given the contradictory requirements of tolerance towards the old and requirements of modernistic creativity? Contemporary architecture should mainly contribute to the general preservation of cultural values and not to its blind destruction. It definitely does not only play a role with respect to unimportant locations or solitary structures, but always when a sensitive but fully suitable architectonic work is needed. However, I regret to state that in too many cases an exclusive lot, which should have been used for excellent architecture, is defiled by a sterile rehash of the original noble building or by a would-be modern and creative monster. So let us respect the old beauty, while at the same time creating new beauty in an undisturbed and careless symbiosis of past and present.